

Respect for diversity ends with Christmas

Pagan statue stays, Nativity scene goes

By Rod Dreher
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Less than two weeks after unveiling a statue of a pagan god in a public park, the city of San Jose, Calif., has ordered the removal of a Nativity scene that has been part of the park's Christmas display for 15 years.

The creche has been moved from the Plaza de Cesar Chavez, where it shared space with secular Christmas symbols, such as reindeer, elves and a gingerbread house, to the grounds of nearby St. Joseph's Cathedral.

The large display is especially popular with families, who throng the downtown park every holiday season to visit the Christmas wonderland. The head of the local Chamber of Commerce said the creche was "less than 1 percent" of the display.

Instructions for the move came not from a court, but from the non-profit board overseeing the annual exhibit, which receives heavy financial support from the city.

Phil Ringenberg, Christmas in the Park board president, said the board decided to remove the creche to avoid offending Jews and other non-Christians, although virtually no one had publicly complained about the Nativity scene.

The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that governments may display religious symbols on public land provided that they are accompanied by secular symbols. San Jose's chief legal officer said the creche passed that test.

"From a legal point of view, there wasn't a requirement that it be moved," City Attorney Joan Gallo told the San Jose Mercury News. "This was a policy de-

cision."

The park made the news last month when the city unveiled a \$500,000 statue of Quetzalcoatl, an Aztec god to whom people were sacrificed in pre-Christian Mexico. Statue proponents, including Mayor Susan Hammer and a majority of the City Council, called the statue a fitting monument to the history of San Jose's Hispanic population.

The mayor's spokesman said she had nothing to do with the decision to remove the manger scene but does support the board.

Steve Tedesco, executive director of the San Jose Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and a former Christmas in the Park board member, said, "There's no question that the ironic timing of doing this right after that statue went up is infuriating people."

Kathy Chavez Napoli, a former mayoral candidate who actively opposed the Quetzalcoatl statue, accused the city of hypocrisy.

"It really does show that if you're the right politically entrenched group, you can have what you want. And if you're not, you're out," she said.

The anti-creche sentiment came chiefly from Dan Pulcrano, the Jewish publisher of Metro, a weekly city newspaper. Members of the Christmas in the Park board met privately with representatives of the city's Jewish community before the board made its decision.

But Lillian Silberstein, head of the San Jose chapter of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, said no Jewish leaders sought a meeting with the board to complain about the Nativity scene, nor did they request that it be removed.

CULTURE, et cetera